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Ethnic Lesbian Identity Development: A Focus on African American and Latino Women

By

Alexandria Quiñones

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF

THE MASTER OF SCIENCE IN COLLEGE STUDENT AFFAIRS DEGREE

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS
2009

I HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THIS THESIS BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING
THIS PART OF THE GRADUATE DEGREE CITED ABOVE

Feb. 19, 2009
DATE

Charles J. Eberly
THESIS DIRECTOR

April 28, 2009
DATE

DEPARTMENT/SCHOOL HEAD

Ethnic Lesbian Identity Development: A Focus on African American and Latino Women

By

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THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Master of Science in College Student Affairs Degree

Department of Counseling and Student Development
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Spring 2009

I hereby recommend that this thesis be accepted as fulfilling this part of the graduate degree above

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ABSTRACT

Ethnic Lesbian Identity Development: A Focus on African American and Latino Women

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate if there were differences in the developmental progression of a lesbian identity for ethnic women, specifically African American and Latino women, from that of majority lesbian women. Selected societal, familial and personal beliefs were examined to discover their influences on the women's development of a lesbian identity. Responses from ten women indicated there was a variation during their progression towards a lesbian identity in relation to the previous stage models based on majority homosexual individuals. Future recommendations for practitioners and researchers included considering environmental influences for expanding research models examining lesbian identity development and supportive student affairs practices for triple minority persons.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION

Individuals undergo a process of identity formation throughout their lives that enables them to understand their sense of self in relationship to society. Identity formation occurs in many different forms depending on individual characteristics such as racial or ethnic identity, gender identity and sexual identity. Identity formation is a lifelong process (Barton, 1999) and can be problematic for individuals who have a multiple minority status (Akerlund & Cheung, 2000). For individuals who belong to multiple groups and more specifically minority group populations, multiple identities may develop in conjunction with each other. Due to a lower social stratification, Romero, Carvajal, Valle, and Orduna (2007) stated "stress from navigating more than one culture would be predominantly experienced by minority groups" (p. 520). It can be seen that an individual who belongs to social minority groups and who is discovering their sexual identity has difficulty in their identity formation due to added stressors not experienced by persons in dominant social categories.

During identity formation there may be a struggle to discover an identity that aligns with one's personal goals, familial expectations and societal expectations. Ethnic, gender, and sexual minorities encounter varying struggles as they develop their identities (Potoczniak, Aldea, & DeBlaere, 2007). What occurs within an individual, specifically a woman, who is part of an ethnic or racial group, and is coming to accept their sexual orientation?

Current conventional wisdom assumes that characteristics associated with gay men are automatically applicable to the lesbian population (Wilkinson, 2006). Based on this assumption, researchers and practitioners may assume that the characteristics of Caucasian lesbians can be applicable to racial or ethnic lesbians. There is a need to explore and recognize the diversities within the lesbian community, particularly with

individuals of color (Lark, 1998). The current study will address the development and overall experiences of a triple minority: ethnic Latino or African-American women involved in the process of developing a lesbian identity.

Statement of the Problem

The major impetus for the present study was based upon the paucity of research found in the reviewed literature which addressed the development of a homosexual identity among racial or ethnic women. The present study focused on women in two ethnic categories, African American and Latino.

The purpose of the study was to identify the progression of homosexual identity development pertaining to lesbians, and the manner in which identity progression may differ from majority lesbians for racial or ethnic women. The focus of the research was to explore the phenomenon of a triple minority status and its possible effects on sexual identity development.

Research Questions

1. What is the progression of homosexual identity development (i.e. personal, familial and societal beliefs) for African American or Latino women?
2. What common themes dealing with issues of identity development emerge among female, lesbian, and African American or Latino women?

Significance of the Study

Limited research was available which targeted racial or ethnic women and their homosexual identity formation. In the review of previous research below, discrepancies were noted among the different homosexual identity models that did not address the concept of a triple minority. Early research focused on homosexual identity development in white males (Cass, 1979; Troiden, 1989). When females and lesbian identity development were considered, those samples studied consisted predominantly of

Caucasian women (Degges-White, Rice, & Myers, 2000). This lack of information on minority group identity development created a question about those individuals who were a part of a triple minority defined as a racial or ethnic person, a female, and a lesbian. The present goal was to examine a selected group of racial or ethnic women and how they formed a lesbian identity and progressed through the process of homosexual identity development. The development of their identity was compared to previous models, such as Cass (1979), Troiden (1989) and Degges-White et al. (2000) to generate an expanded model of homosexual identity development specifically focused on racial or ethnic [illegible].

Limitations/Assumptions

A limitation existed for the present study in finding participants who were from all three categories needed for the study: African American or Latina, female and self-identified as a lesbian, whether only to themselves or to others. The invisible nature of the participants' sexual orientation and limited availability to the participants added to the inability to generalize the findings to the overall population of ethnic lesbian women. Another limitation was the acceptance of the researcher among the participants as a confidant since the researcher, a heterosexual Latino female, was not a member of all the participants' populations.

An assumption was present that there would be a vast difference of the progression of development from the original models. Although the assumption may produce bias into the study, it was the duty as an ethical researcher to consider, analyze, and report the data from the responses given by participants.

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of the present study, a lesbian was operationally defined as a female who has questioned or rejected a traditional heterosexual identity (Rust, 1992).

African American and Latino were defined as a person who self-identified themselves as a part of these ethnic/racial groups.

Summary

Chapter I introduced the problem of a lack of research addressing the lesbian identity development of an ethnic woman. What are the possible ways in which minority or ethnic, lesbian women arrive at a stable sense of personal identity? Chapter II will present a review of literature focused on theoretical and sociological influences on a female who is a member of an ethnic or racial group. The second chapter will address homosexuality and lesbian identity formation, as well as societal and cultural norms in respect to the specified triple minority group. Societal norms include gender roles and sexuality for ethnic women while cultural norms address the role of the family in identity formation. Chapter III will describe the qualitative methodologies used to gather, organize, and make meaning out of the verbal data collected for the purposes of this study. Chapter IV will present the results of the study based on emerging themes found in the data. The chapter will provide detailed background information about the participant biographies. Each stage of Cass's identity development model (1979) was examined based on the verbal data obtained in the present study. Chapter V will integrate the present study's findings with prior literature. Emerging themes will be discussed and a proposed model for ethnic lesbian identity development as they relate to the participants in the current study is framed. Recommendations for student affairs practitioners working with minority or ethnic lesbian women will be included, as well as recommendations for future research in ethnic lesbian identity development.

CHAPTER II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review for the present study of minority or ethnic lesbian women's identity development examined three broad areas: identity formation, societal norms, and cultural values. The wide-ranging areas will associate the importance of women and their cultural background and how they influence each other. Identity formation will address homosexuality identity development and lesbian identity development. Societal norms will discuss gender role expectations and the image of human sexuality within society. Cultural values will consider the importance of familial and religious influence on the personal development and sexual identity formation of an individual. All of these topics are important to women, their minority status, and the development of their sexual orientation and need to be considered for the purposes of the study.

Identity Formation

Homosexual Identity Development

In the past thirty years there has been considerable research published on homosexual identity development. In early research, Cass (1979, 1984) evaluated the experiences and perceptions of male homosexuals in the context of their identity development. The developmental process was determined to occur in six stages as an individual accepted their identity as a homosexual (Cass, 1979). Notably, Cass did not want to portray forming a homosexual identity as negative (Arnold & King, 1997). Other identity development models included a four-stage model (Troiden, 1988) or four phases (Fassinger & Miller, 1996) to distinguish the experiences and challenges individuals faced when developing an identity related to sexual orientation.

The homosexual identity development model Cass (1979) proposed consisted of six stages. Each stage was evaluated in accordance with different cognitive, behavioral,

and affective dimensions (Arnold & King, 1997). The stages in order, according to Cass (1979), were identity confusion, identity comparison, identity tolerance, identity acceptance, identity pride, and identity synthesis. The following section describes these stages in more detail.

The first stage Cass (1984) identified was "identity confusion" (p.147). In this stage individuals experienced an inconsistency between their inner thoughts and outer behaviors. They may have homosexual tendencies and decide to explore their ideas and feelings further. If they do not continue exploring, they will foreclose on their homosexual identity (Cass, 1979).

Upon the exploration of their new feelings, an individual will proceed to the next stage called "identity comparison" (Cass, 1984, p.151). There is a possibility of the individual being homosexual. There is a constant evaluation of their identity due to the potential to be alienated by their social network (Cass, 1984). Identity foreclosure is an option. If this does not occur, then the individual moves forward through the next stage of homosexual identity development.

The third stage was named "identity tolerance" (Cass, 1984, p.151). There is not a complete acceptance of the homosexual identity but a search begins for others that may be like them. The interaction with other homosexual individuals may cause the identity tolerant person to foreclose on their development if the experience is negative. Considering the interaction with other homosexuals is positive, an individual may perceive homosexuality as desirable and start to accept that as their identity, which is stage four titled "identity acceptance" (Cass, 1984, p.151). Once an individual accepts their homosexual identity, increasing contact with the homosexual community and adopting a homosexual lifestyle continues (Cass, 1979). A decrease in discomfort with

their newly found identity occurs and individuals may choose to disclose to their network of trusted individuals (Cass, 1979, 1984).

As stage five occurs, a dichotomization is present between those who are part of the homosexual community and those who are heterosexual (Cass, 1979). A strong sense of self comes along with their identity as homosexual at this stage, titled "identity pride" (Cass, 1984, p.152). As an example, an individual may partake in gay pride parades or become an activist for the LGBTQ community. If the dichotomy is inconsistent, then the individual could possibly foreclose on their identity (Cass, 1979).

Stage six begins when individuals integrate being homosexual into their identity as a whole, which is termed "identity synthesis" (Cass, 1984, p.152). A strong commitment to their sexual orientation is made during integration (Rotheram-Borus & Langabeer, 2001, p. 99) while realizing their identity is more than just being homosexual. A personal satisfaction and comfort level is reached where disclosure is no longer an issue (Cass, 1979).

Cass's original model and other identity development models (Troiden, 1988; Fassinger & Miller, 1996) that immediately followed provided a foundational framework, but only dealt with male participants who were predominately Caucasian. It was reported that past models could not be applied to specific populations and future research should target minority populations and include their experiences to the growing field of homosexual identity development (Akerlund and Cheung, 2000; Cass, 1979, 1984; Degges-White, Rice & Myers, 2000; Loiacano, 1989; Troiden, 1988; Fassinger & Miller, 1996).

Lesbian Identity Development

Some identity development inquiries did focus on lesbians. Ponse researched lesbian identity development in relation to the lesbian community (in Troiden, 1988). She

found there was a "gay trajectory" that most women experienced in identification of their lesbian selves. Lesbians experienced five steps of the "gay trajectory" in no particular order (in Troiden, 1988, p. 38). There was also a differentiation between lesbian identity and lesbian activity. The "gay trajectory" found for lesbians differed from the original model developed by Cass (1979) because there was not a stage progression.

Degges-White, et al. (2000) showed the development of a lesbian identity as non-linear or not a stage progression as well. Twelve Caucasian women were sampled who ranged in age from 22 to 46. Consistencies with Cass' model included the feelings associated with some stages, such as confusion and acceptance. Inconsistencies occurred within the progression of developing a lesbian identity. The women started at the first stage, identity confusion, and experienced similar feelings as those identified in Cass' model (Degges-White, et al., 2000). The second stage, identity comparison, differed where the women "tried on" a lesbian identity ((Degges-White, et al., 2000) to understand and make sense of their feelings. Cass' third stage, identity tolerance, was found to not occur as the third stage of progression for lesbians in their study. Degges-White, et al. (2000) indicated that identity tolerance, where lesbians sought other lesbians, occurred after the women had accepted their own lesbian identity. The fifth stage, identity pride, was different because the women did not feel the need to advertise their sexual orientation (Degges-White, et al., 2000) as Cass' model (1979) indicated would be the outcome of this particular stage among homosexual males. Identity pride was also experienced less frequently among the women than the other stages. Stage six, identity synthesis, was indicated as a "crucial part of healthy development" among lesbians (Degges-White, Rice, & Myers, 2000, p. 329); however, based on the study, the sixth stage differed in comparison to men due to the order in which lesbian women experienced the stage. Lesbian women were more likely to synthesize their identity

directly after accepting their lesbian identity, which is moving from stage four to stage six. The fifth stage, "identity pride" (Cass, 1984, p. 152), was less prevalent within the description of their experiences "coming out" as a lesbian.

According to Degges-White, Rice, & Myers (2000), lesbian identity development progressed through Cass' model differently. It was inferred through their findings that the stages of progression were identity confusion, identity comparison, identity acceptance, identity synthesis, and then identity tolerance or stage one, two, four, six, three. The authors also reported that there were not six stages that were experienced repeatedly by the participants in their study (Degges-White, et al., 2000). The experiences of each stage were similar among men and women, but the discrepancy existed in the order the stages were experienced in the women studied (Degges-White, Rice, & Myers, 2000).

Societal Norms

An understanding of societal standards in relation to ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation is in order. Society perpetuates cultural norms and enforces standards from the dominant culture. Norms perpetuation is carried out through sexism, gender hierarchies, and racism (Greene, 1994, 2000), where being a member of the non-dominant culture is seen as disadvantageous due to the stigma associated with group membership (Rust, 1992). Members of an ethnic group may feel pressure to socialize themselves to not only their own cultural expectations, but also to the norms of the larger society. The identity development of women includes gender roles, the idea of sexuality and its relationship to homosexual identity development.

Gender Roles

Along with the pressures of societal norms, gender roles can be a predominant influence in identity formation within an individual. Loiacano (1989) stated the expectations of gender roles between men and women influenced lesbian identity

development. The dichotomous consideration of gender in Western culture deems two proper genders in society, which are socialized with specific behaviors for their appropriate genders (Greene, 2000). Gender roles are considered the behaviors a culture deems appropriate or even ideal for men and women. Men and women are taught to be sexually attracted to the opposite gender (Greene, 1994), which is seen as normal. Based on these findings, homosexuality clearly violates the hetero-normality of society which can cause cognitive dissonance among minority members (Kornegay, 2004).

Ethnic females developing a homosexual identity may feel additional conflicts based on cultural and societal standards. According to Loiacano (1989) "lesbianism is largely considered incompatible with the role expectations of women in the Black community" (p.21). African American and Latino lesbians may feel in conflict with their expected gender roles and their sexual identity. Akerlund and Cheung (2000) stated that ethnic lesbian minorities are challenged to integrate an ethnic identity with a sexual identity in a society that does not fully accept either one. Ethnic lesbians "have difficulties forming a positive identity due to the stigma assigned with being homosexual" (Akerlund &Cheung, 2000, p. 279) largely because heterosexism and homophobia have been deeply rooted in this hetero-normative society (Case, Hesp, & Eberly, 2005) as well as within the African American and Latino cultures.

Hetero-normativity was defined as the distinct pressures of a dominant ideal influenced by the norms of society where heterosexuality is reinforced for men and for women (Cameron & Kulick, 2003). In a woman's ethnic group, hetero-normativity may subject these ethnic lesbians to homophobic bigotry (Leider, 2000). The influence of religion and specifically the church, the importance of masculinity, and the role of the family may be the underlying cause of homophobia within the Black (Williams, 2003) as well as the Latino community.

Sexuality

According to Greene (2000), gender roles are frequently used to define the parameters of sexuality. There is a tendency to stress masculinity or *machismo* (Couce & Domenech-Rodriguez, 2002) and its opposite, femininity. The idea of masculinity and femininity reinforces accepted societal images and behaviors of men and women according to hetero-normative standards (Cameron & Kulick, 2003).

Within ethnic groups, there are negative stereotypical images perpetuated by the dominant culture. For African American women, Greene (2000) stated that distorted [illegible] Americans and their sexuality. African American women have been labeled with [illegible] for hundreds of years and perpetuated as such in the media and films. Kornegay (2004) stated

> the colonial thought ensured that the abnormally grotesque essence of blackness would come to validate the normativity of whiteness through the racialization of black sexuality (blacks are sexual deviants) and the sexualization of black identity (sexual deviancy is the reason for blacks being oppressed (p.33).

Latino women are also portrayed as sexual, even deviant beings, because of the purportedlyexotic heritage. They are portrayed as sultry temptresses seducing men with their voluptuous curves. Women in both cultures have been exemplified as sexual creatures but only acceptable as their sexuality relates to men. These ideologies or sexual mythologies play a role in the response to lesbians in ethnic families or if lesbians are seen as visible members of the community (Greene, 2000). The ideologies reinforce societal expectations of hetero-normativity, gender roles of man and woman, and cultural homophobia.

Cultural Values

There is an influence of majority ideals and dominant cultural norms expressed and learned in society, especially with regard to identity development. This influence is

also taken into consideration in relation to different cultures that may not be in harmony with majority ideals. Socialization and enculturation emphasizes the importance of parental attitudes in socializing a child into their cultural group (Romero, Cueller, & Roberts, 2000). With different cultural groups, enculturation occurs with the dominant mainstream culture and their own racial or ethnic group (Romero, Cuellar, & Roberts, 2000) and leads to bicultural stress (Romero, Carvajal, Valle, & Orduna, 2007). Romero, et al., (2007) indicated "females in particular may feel conflicted between customary cultural practices and modern Western adolescents' expectations and activities" (p.521). The cultural factors can influence the development of a lesbian identity, especially in members of an ethnic group.

It is important to consider cultural influence in accordance with sexual identity formation in ethnic women. Women belonging to either the African American culture or Latino culture incorporate the construct of masculinity, family, and religion into their identity development. In the Latin American culture, well-established gender roles expect women to be submissive and virtuous while men provide, protect and defend the family (Greene, 1994). African American women tend to find themselves on the lower racial and gender hierarchy; therefore, "being heterosexual gives them a slightly higher status than being lesbian" (Greene, 1994, p. 246). Consideration of cultural influences is particularly critical when women are developing a lesbian identity due to the homophobia prominent in both majority and racial/ethnic cultures.

The Family

Family influence is an important part of an individual's development. According to Ferdman and Gallegos (2001), parents and extended family members teach their children about their culture. It is through "the messages and attitudes about one's group conveyed by significant

Caregivers that set the stage for understanding who one is in relation to other groups" (p. 46). Murdock described the family as a structure consisting of a married man and woman and their dependents (as cited in Ingoldsby, 2006). Based on Murdock, hetero-normative principles are predominant. Although the family structure may be similar to the dominant culture, the role of the multicultural family may vary due to different values and norms stressed during development. The family is viewed as the first and last social institution an individual has contact with and influences them as a citizen in society (Johnson, 1981).

[illegible], familialism is one of the most important cultural values (Bernal & Knight, 1993). Cruz & Domenech-Rodriguez (2002) defined familialism or *familismo* as the importance of family closeness, getting along, and contributing to the well-being of the family. Latinos who hold onto their core values help maintain *familismo* traditions and connections between generations. The generational message of *machismo* culture was reported from children as a fear of losing the benefits of the family support system because they identify with ideas or a sexual identity of which the family does not approve.

African American families are similar to Latino families with respect to the importance of the family and its cultural teachings to future generations. The Black family provides support to not only the African American community but to the development and strengthening of traditional familial roles and responsibilities (Johnson, 1981). The traditional roles in a family tend to link to a biblical foundation where Black theology and the church deem homosexuality as immoral (Kornegay, 2004). Homosexuality is also viewed as a White phenomenon by Blacks (Loiacano, 1989). Homophobia in the Black family and community is created out of White supremacy or

the dominant culture and the Black church (Kornegay, 2004), which shapes the identity and development of Black lesbian individuals.

The understanding of homosexual identity, societal, and cultural factors and influences is pertinent to research on ethnic lesbian identity development. There is a need for research to enlighten individuals and continue to develop new ideas and information about an invisible population that may be living in silence due to the strong presence of hetero-normative cultural values in their life.

Summary

The literature reviewed in Chapter II surrounded challenges to ethnic lesbian identity development, specifically the impact of societal norms, cultural and familial expectations. Gender roles and ideas of sexuality were discussed as influences impacting the development of a lesbian identity in ethnic women as well. Chapter III will outline the methodology used to conduct the present study, while Chapter IV will present themes emerging from the life history interviews of the ten self-identified research participants. Chapter V will integrate the identity development themes found in the present study with prior available literature on ethnic and sexual identity development. From the combination of emerging themes and prior literature, the PI will propose a model for ethnic lesbian identity development. Recommendations for practitioners and future research in the area of ethnic lesbian identity development will complete the chapter.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

On-Line Design

The online design for the present study was adapted from James and Busher (2006). The e-mail interview procedure used in James and Busher was deemed suitable for this study due to the detailed use of outlined expectations for the researcher and

participants by using a rubric (Appendix B). Constant comparative analysis of the data helped evaluate participants' responses. The use of constant comparative analysis involved comparing participants' responses and an initial observation (Patton, 1991) until data redundancy was complete. The researcher developed a system to evaluate participants' responses appropriately as data were gathered for the present study. The system reviewed participants' word choices and used follow up questions to ensure an accurate summary for member-checking the emerging issues within the participants' responses.

[illegible] for the current study were modified from [illegible] and Degges-White, Rice, & Myers (2000). In their respective studies, research participants answered questions pertaining to homosexual (gay and lesbian) identity development as a Black American and the progression of lesbian identity development for a sample of women. The questions for the present study were adapted to include Latinas as an ethnic group and to focus upon women self-identifying as lesbian.

Participants

The participants for the present qualitative study included women who self-identified as African American and/or Latina and who were experiencing or had experienced the formation of a homosexual identity as lesbians, whether declared to others or not. The participants were initially contacted through personal associations with the researcher and lesbian groups found on the Internet. Additional participants obtained for the study resulted from the use of the "snowball technique (inviting the initial participants to refer acquaintances who were lesbian)" (Degges-White, et al., 2000) and African American and/or Latina.

Ten participants ranged in age from 22 to 37. The original outline called for participants between the ages of 18 and 30. The 37 year old was included because there

was little difference in her experiences compared to the others. The study sample consisted of two African American women, two Latinas, one Hispanic, one Mexican, and one Mexican American, one Nicaraguan/mestiza, one "mixed" which consisted of African American and Hispanic heritage and one who labeled herself as multi-ethnic. Nine of the participants labeled themselves as lesbian and one as bisexual but "leaning towards lesbian".

Interviewing Process

Due to the limited possibilities of interviewing participants face-to-face, research interviews were conducted via Internet communications, primarily through e-mail. The Internet has become popular in use among researchers to interview participants due to the availability of the Internet and email. Although online data collection is new to researchers, the advantages include gathering information and responses in a short time frame, access to a larger population, cost effectiveness, and a better response rate (Lefever, Dal, & Mathiasdottir, 2007). Schaefer and Dillman stated "there is evidence that suggests that participant responses in email surveys can be more detailed and comprehensive than in paper-and-pencil surveys" (as cited in Lefever, Dal, & Mathiasdottir, 2007). Qualitatively, James and Busher (2006) stated that email correspondence

> …encourages participants to explore and revisit their insights into developing [professional] identities, allowing them to move back and forth through their narratives, thinking about their responses, drafting and redrafting what they want to write (Mann and Stewart, 2000); creating, in effect, a form of enriched interview (p.405-406).

The email format used in this study allowed the researcher to obtain an individualized response from each participant with an opportunity for follow-up and member checking.

In order to maintain a level of confidence with the researcher, anonymity and confidentiality continued to be a focus with research participants. Anonymity was an

issue because complete anonymity was not a possibility (Stewart & Williams, 2005) due to the exchange of emails creating some identification for the participant (James & Busher, 2006). Diffusion was avoided by sending individual emails to each participant rather than using group or mass emails; therefore, each participant did not have access to other research participants in the study. No names or emails were used for the participants' answers within the discussion section of the study to maintain anonymity. Confidentiality was preserved with the expectations of the current study outlined for research participants using a rubric. James & Busher (2006) outlined rubrics with [illegible] for email interviewing. The rubric eased participant's fears of privacy in the James and Busher study (2006) and provided consistency among participants. The rubric included guidelines for the participant about the entire email interviewing process. The initial contact, the length of time needed to respond to questions, and an overview of each step pertaining to email correspondence were incorporated into the rubric. As a model, use of the rubric from James and Busher (2006) in the present study informed research participants of the expectations for email interviewing in this qualitative study about lesbian identity development (Appendix B).

The participants contacted were sent a rubric to guide their participation with the current study. The rubric acted as an informed consent form (Appendix B). Consent to participate in the study was given upon receipt of the participants' response to the call for participation and rubric. After consent was granted via email to the researcher, the first set of open-ended survey questions was distributed to the participants. Questions were separated so as to not overwhelm the participants with too many questions at once. Too many questions can appear daunting and delay response or even discourage participation in the study (Bampton & Cowton, 2002). A balance was established to inquire about research participants' first developmental issues in the first round of questions and then

relate their responses to their sexual identity development within their ethnic or racial background in the second round of questioning. With two participants, the second round of questions was answered within the first survey. In this case, the participant was encouraged to discuss other experiences to build the participants' developmental reflection during the second set of questions. The participants were given a deadline to respond with their surveys as outlined in the rubric. Participants were given three days to complete their surveys. The researcher used a follow up email (Appendix C) to ensure completion and accuracy of participation by email. The use of email acted as a record of communications between researcher and participant. Once the researcher reached data redundancy, a thank you email was sent to the participants for their cooperation in the study (Appendix E).

Instrument

To best address the research questions for this study, open-ended questions were acquired from Loiacano's (1989) study conducted to assess gay identity among Black Americans, and Degges-White, Rice, & Myers' (2000) study, which reevaluated Cass's theory of sexual identity formation specifically related to lesbians. The questions were adapted to cater to lesbian women and to include Latinas as an ethnic group. The following questions were adapted.

1. When were you first aware of your same-sex feelings, or the sense that your sexual identity might be different from heterosexuals? What happened to cause that awareness and how did you feel?
2. What was your experience of "coming out" to yourself? What made it difficult? What helped make it easier? How did you perceive yourself in relation to peers? Family? Co-workers? Society at large?
3. What would you say were/are the major barriers to you accepting

yourself as a lesbian?

4. What has been your experience of "coming out" to others? Who has been supportive? Who was the most difficult?

5. How would you describe your relationship to the lesbian community? To the Black or Latino community? For example, how supported do you feel by these two communities as a whole?

6. Did your "coming out" experience and identity as a lesbian woman change your sense of acceptance in the Black or Latino community? Your involvement in Black ethnic community?

7. Is there any aspect of your identity you consider central at present? If someone was to ask you who you are, and you were comfortable enough to be open with them, what would you say?

Due to the e-mail interview format, questions were separated to inquire about the first developmental stages and then incorporate the respondents' ethnic or racial background. The first three questions along with three demographic questions (Appendix D1) were part of the initial questions to guide the interview towards the participants' overall development. The last four questions (Appendix D2) delved into ethnic or racial background influences with their sexual identity development. This protocol was designed to encourage discussion of participants' overall experience of sexual identity development as a member of an ethnic group.

In addition to the questions, selected demographic information was collected for descriptive purposes. Items such as age, ethnic or racial background, and sexual orientation were included. Items designed to seek background information were open-ended to allow the participant to define their sexual identity and not be limited by the researcher's categories.

Summary

Chapter III has described the research methodology for the present study adopted from James and Busher (2006), "Credibility, authenticity, and voice: Dilemmas in online interviewing", Loiacano's (1989) study titled "Gay identity issues among Black Americans: Racism, homophobia, and the need for validation" as well as Degges-White, Rice & Myers' (2000) study carried out to reevaluate Cass's theory of sexual identity formation specifically related to lesbians. Chapter IV is a description of the participants' biographies and the emerging themes associated with their ethnic lesbian identity development. Each stage was evaluated for its relevancy based on the participants' responses. Chapter V will present conclusions, a proposed model of ethnic lesbian identity development, as well as future implications for student affairs practitioners and researchers.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

The present study addressed the progression of forming a sexual identity as an ethnic woman for African American and Latino women. Each research question is addressed individually below in order to systematically highlight emerging themes. It was important to focus on the theory behind homosexual development since a majority of prior research focused on Caucasian subjects or males (Cass, 1979; 1984; Degges-White, Rice, & Myers, 2000; Fassinger & Miller, 1996; Hesp, 2006; Troiden, 1988). In conjunction with reviewing the theory, it was equally important to consider the social implications and contextual influences of the women's cultural background on their development of a lesbian identity. The triple minority consisting of sexual identity, being a woman, and belonging to an ethnic group can be hidden due to the pressure of homophobia faced from each woman's cultural community (Williams, 2003). Because there was limited access to the population needed for the study, the medium of email was used in order to contact a wider range of individuals, groups and organizations to survey for the research topic (James & Busher, 2006).

Fourteen women were contacted through personal association or through snowball sampling. A total of ten women responded to the surveys. One participant wanted to be referred to by a pseudonym while the others will be referred to as a numbered participant to protect confidentiality and anonymity for the purpose of the written results in the research.

Participant Biographies

A brief background description is provided below for each research participant to assist the reader to make meaning of the thoughts and opinions provided in the interviews to follow.

Participant #1.—Participant #1 was a 27-year -old African American woman who identified her sexual identity as lesbian. She started experiencing feelings for same sex individuals at age 12. The school hired a new female guidance counselor. The participant found herself "acting out" in order to be sent to the guidance counselor's office due to her feelings towards same sex individuals. She led herself to believe her homosexual feelings were a direct reflection of her "acting out" or being bad. She thought her "attraction for females" was a result and punishment for bad behavior.

The participant accepted her identity around the age of 15, but only to herself. She was having a difficult time in relation to her support group (friends/family) because she "had to hide herself" due to the feeling of isolation because there were no "out black lesbians to look up to" in her community. Coming to terms with her identity was difficult because she was being told that her feelings were a sin. She grew up in a divorced home, and she was raised by her father. It was when she "acted out" that she was sent to live with her mother for three years. During the three years, her mother forced her "to go to counseling, was placed in a Christian school and made to go to church to correct her behavior" (Participant #1, personal communication, September 8, 2008). She discussed her experience growing up and the effect her familial beliefs had on her identity development.

> I was coming to terms with myself and who I was all while being told that all the things that I was feeling was a sin. This deepened my belief that I was bad and something was wrong with me. My mother and father are both religious people and often told me that my actions would lead to a lifetime of eternal damnation (Participant #1, personal communication, September 8, 2008).

The participant came out to her family at age 17. At the time she came out, she lived with her father, and he revealed her adoptive status to her out of anger when he learned she was a lesbian. He then kicked her out of the house. Participant #1 said that her father revealed this to her out of anger that she was a lesbian. She stated she "didn't

feel connected enough to her family to gain support from them" (Participant #1, personal communication, September 12, 2008). It was her boss and mentor at the time that supported her the most. The participant learned "the importance of living openly and never being ashamed of who you are, whatever that may be".

Currently, she feels "very detached from the lesbian community" in her city as well as from the black community. She stated she does not really fit in but would feel more accepted in the LGBT community than the Black community. The LGBT community has supported her in several capacities where the Black community was never supportive toward her. Although she is open with nearly everyone, she still seems to struggle with synthesizing her identities together because there are certain situations where she will not disclose to others. The passing strategy is maintained out of fear she will be threatened or "assaulted".

Participant #2.—Participant #2 was a 22-year -old African American woman who identified her sexual identity as lesbian. The participant started to realize she was attracted to women when she was 12 years old. The experience started when she was with a group of her friends. They were all looking at guys and talking about them, but she only wanted to look at the girls. Her experience made her "feel weird" and she realized she was "different" from the others

After her initial same-sex attraction, she continued to have difficulty adjusting. She told those closest to her first and then adapted the attitude "if you want to know ask" (Participant #2, personal communication, September 14, 2008). Participant #2 did not indicate a specific age when she decided to come out to others. There are still quite a few people who do not know she is a lesbian, but she said she does not feel that she is hiding the fact that she is gay. She did not want to "stand out" or be "different". In particular, Participant #2 was worried how others' perception of her would change if they learned of

her sexual identity. She perceived herself as a role model and did not want to let anyone down. She thought being a lesbian would make her peers, family, and co-workers uncomfortable and that somehow making her peers uncomfortable would be letting them down. She wanted to be accepted and felt she would be judged or not accepted based on the person she loved. Also she was self-conscious because she was told she was "not gay enough" in her first lesbian relationship. Participant #2 was able to "pass for a very long time" even though she was a lesbian.

At present, Participant #2 feels that she is just herself and would not feel the need to say she was gay unless she was asked directly. She does think she would be judged first by her sexual identity and everything would come next especially when it pertains to the Black community. Her sexual identity has not affected her involvement. In regards to the LGBT community, she does feel she would be judged as "not gay enough" and is in the beginning stages of involvement. Participant #2 believes her attendance at an LGBT leadership conference eased her coming out process and her understanding that other people's opinions should not affect how she thinks about herself.

Participant #3.—Participant #3 was a 24-year -old woman who identified her sexual identity as lesbian. She classified her ethnic background as multi-ethnic. The participant started to be curious about her same-sex feelings at the age of seven. The homoerotic experience started when she was with group of five friends. They were all experimental with each other until about age 10. She said they all "naturally" grew out of it and started dating guys in their teen years. Participant #3 stated she never felt different from others because of the group experimentation. Therefore her same-sex feelings were natural to her. It was not until her family hosted a foreign exchange student who was bisexual and hit on her that her mind was opened to the possibilities of being lesbian. She considered relationships with women but never acted on it.

Participant #3 came out to herself easily since she had positive experiences. She mentioned that coming out to everyone else was difficult because she was completely submerged in a straight environment. She was president of her sorority, active in student government and other organizations as well as dating men in the social scene. She did not want to deal with the negativity and judgmental nature of people at that time. Not until after secretly dating her current partner for several months did she disclose her sexual orientation to her closest friends.

Participant #3 had mixed feelings and reactions from her family members and [illegible] regards to her sexual orientation. She said her brother did not care, he was more open-minded and accepting. Not all of her sisters were supportive. Participant #3 revealed that her dad "PRETENDED" (the word was in caps in her response) not to mind; however, he slowly weaned himself out of her life. She described her father as a man of Portuguese and Native American descent who held beliefs about women as a minority, that is, women needed a man to go anywhere in the world. Her mother, a woman of Mexican and Hungarian decent, was up front with Participant #3. The mother told her she did not understand, did not know what to think, and it would take her time to adjust. The participant said that her mom did "freak out at times" but still had "unfaltering support" (Participant #3, personal communication, September 17, 2008).

After spending time with her partner, Participant #3 came out to her friends. She felt at ease with her sexuality at the time and was able to disclose this to her peers. She felt even more comfortable after she told her friends because she said, "all they had to say was DUH!" Her co-workers "discovered" she was lesbian. She said at first they ostracized her until they "got to know her and her work ethic". Her co-workers made comments like, "She's a lesbian? But she's so sweet" or "she's so pretty" (Participant #3, personal communication, September 17, 2008).

Currently, Participant #3 is confident and situated with her life and lifestyle. She is comfortable with the lesbian community because she previously worked as a go-go dancer in a gay bar prior to dating her partner. The lesbian community in her area is very active in regards to legal and societal issues. Participant #3 is also very active in the Latino community despite her thoughts about homosexuality being culturally unacceptable within the community. If asked about her sexual orientation, she has no problem being open about her sexuality; however, she does not feel the need to say, "Hi, I'm gay" up front. She feels that she never brought this up in conversation when she identified as straight, and therefore she does not need to mention her sexuality when she meets people for the first time. Her personal and biggest barrier with her sexual orientation is society. She said

> the biggest obstacle I face is being engaged to my partner and knowing we will never be able to protect each other with a family insurance plan, never adopt a child (in her state) as a family, never benefit from the laws of marriage, etc. (Participant #3, personal communication, September 17, 2008)

Participant #4.—Participant #4 was a 37-year-old woman who identified herself as a lesbian. She characterized her ethnic background as Nicaraguan and *mestiza* (a person of mixed blood or heritage). She wanted to be referred to as "CM" for her pseudonym. She did not remember when she first became aware of her same sex feelings and felt she "always knew" about these feelings. She remembered her best friend from her childhood and never forgot her. After her first best friend she said, "I had several other best friends, even though it was never sexual, it was emotional and there were fantasies about it because I did not know any better."

CM came out to herself in college. She had feelings for women but could never bring herself to tell them. She decided to come out to others during her graduate program when her close friend and colleague died suddenly at the age of 24. CM said, "I had to

get my life together and live." She sought therapy to help cope and understand how she was going to come out. She also had support from her friends who did not leave her to be alone when she was figuring out who she was at the time. They helped her cope and understand her new lifestyle.

When expressing her sexual identity to others, CM has had to be discreet in certain situations. She said that her mom would not "get it" and her mom had to adjust when CM returned home to Nicaragua. CM talked about how her lifestyle impacted her mother in her home town. She said

> [illegible] town; I don't want to have people staring at her because she's [illegible] lesbian kid. She does not deserve it, and I know that they would do that to her just because that's what small towns are like in Nicaragua. [illegible]ady talked enough when I turned 30 and was unmarried. (Participant #4, personal communication, September 30, 2008)

She also used to work at a religious institution in Nicaragua before she went to graduate school. She never told anyone there because she thought it would lead to her termination. She said it was hard and she had to "pretend to smile and nod whenever someone told a gay joke." She dealt with her situation by telling herself and her partner that she was a "secret agent"; a lesbian undercover at "Tom Monaghan's little university"[a].

Currently, CM lives in a small town in Ohio and has surrounded herself with her friends who were not affected by her coming out as a lesbian. She chose to get involved with the community and her straight friends rather than just limiting herself to the LGBT crowd since she found a safe place for herself. She had to grasp her identity in contrast to her religious upbringing as Catholic. CM realized that loyalty to the Catholic Church was not worth the struggle and she is not leaving her partner to satisfy an institutional belief.

Participant #5.—Participant #5 was a 25-year-old woman who identified as a

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[a] Tom Monaghan was the retired founder of Domino's Pizza. He founded Ave Marie College, a Catholic liberal arts institution designed to prepare students for leadership in academics, professional occupations, and services to the greater community. http://www.avemaria.edu/monaghan/ November 18, 2008.

lesbian. She identified her ethnic background as Latina. She explained her first realization in retrospect to her current accepted lesbian identity. She stated that it was around age nine even though she was not aware that her feelings and actions were sexually oriented or identity related at that time. She described herself as "feminine with boyish tendencies." Participant #5 said, "I collected baseball and basketball playing cards but I also had my Barbies. When we would play tag, I would go after the girls and sometimes pull their hair just because."

Participant #5 explained that she came out twice: once in high school and another time in college. In high school, she was already surrounded by friends who were gay and/or lesbian and was well supported. She said it was difficult to come out to her family as she was forced in high school to tell her parents by her partner's mother at that time. She did try to date men in college for two years. She realized dating men was not appealing to her and she had no desire to continue dating. When Participant #5 came back out in college as a lesbian she depicted her coming out as a "welcome back home type of feeling."

At present, Participant #5 describes herself as a college educated lesbian Latina. She is involved in both the LGBT and Latino community. She takes a very active role in the LGBT community with different Pride events in her area, which occurred after her college years. In the black and Latino community, she tries to integrate those friends with the LGBT community because she feels there is a gap within the younger generation across these communities. She likes to show people that being a lesbian is beyond stereotypes (i.e. butch). Participant #5 would like to label herself as an activist once she has more involvement with the LGBT community.

Participant #6.--Participant #6 was a 30-year-old woman who identified as a lesbian. She identified her ethnic background as Mexican. She was fascinated with women characters on television, movies, music, and sports and ended up having small

crushes on them. She became curious about kissing women shortly after she had her first kiss with a boy. At the age of 15, she kissed her first girl and liked it. She acknowledged it as "different", "special" and "nice" (Participant #6, personal communication, October 21, 2008).

Participant #6 had a difficult time coming out to herself and others. She attributed it to not having support or feeling pride from family and friends. During high school, she said it was more acceptable to be bisexual than lesbian. As she connected with other lesbians and gays, she became proud of who she was and came out to her lesbian friends at age 22. She did not come out to her straight friends until age 24. She has not come out to her family as of yet. She is worried that they will not approve of her lifestyle or support her. She said, "I don't want to disappoint them yet." She also keeps her sexuality private at work. Her place of employment has clear rules regarding sexual discrimination but she has removed herself from co-workers who make jokes about gay and lesbian individuals.

Currently, Participant #6 has an internal struggle with her acceptance of a lesbian lifestyle and her awareness of how much in opposition her family is to such a lifestyle. She has confirmed her sexuality by being with women and being proud of whom she is as a person.

Participant #7.--Participant #7 was a 20-year-old woman who identified as a lesbian. She identified her ethnic background as Mexican American. Her first awareness of same sex feelings came about during her sophomore year in high school. She caught

herself "checking out" females instead of males. She described her behavior as strange and had no idea how to react to her feelings.

Participant #7 came out to individuals at the age of 16. When she was ready, she told her closest friends that she was bisexual even though she knew she was a lesbian. She said, "I guess I did that to ease them in, and I thought telling them I was Bisexual, I had a better chance they would accept me or be okay with it." She finally told them she was lesbian when they tried to "hook her up" with a guy. Her friends were still okay with her. She felt relieved and supported by her best friends, which she said helped her a lot because she was in a "homophobic environment". When asked about the homophobic environment, she described it as a population made up of two races, Hispanic and Black. She stated,

> In my experience, Hispanic and Black people are less understanding, especially the older folks. In school, I would get such rude comments. I was one of the few people who had the guts to come out in school because most students were scared of other students' reactions. Students gave me rude comments, such as you're going to hell or that's nasty (in reference to her hand holding with her girlfriend in the halls).

During her senior year the environment was better because her peers knew she was lesbian. She knew who was okay with her sexuality and who was not.

Participant #7 talked about the difficulty in telling her family. She told her mom in her senior year in high school because someone told her mother that she was holding hands with a girl at school. Her mother thought she was going through a phase and would grow out of it. She has two cousins who supported her wholeheartedly. She indicated other family members know even though she did not tell them. She said, "A part of me

did not care they knew because I thought of it like one less person to tell!" Participant #7 also talked about how her sexuality is a "don't ask, don't tell subject" with her family.

More recently, Participant #7 is a member of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Trans-gender Alliance (LGBTA). She enjoys it because she meets people like herself who have experienced similar, if not the same experiences, as far as coming out as a cultural minority. Even with her involvement, she said more of her friends are heterosexual. She fully accepts herself as a lesbian and refers to herself as a "lipstick lesbian" because she does not have short hair or wear tom boy clothes. She said most people think she is straight because she does not fit the stereotype. Her mother still believes her daughter is in a phase even after five years. Participant #7 is waiting for her to be okay with her sexuality.

Participant #8.—Participant #8 was a 29-year-old woman who identified as a bisexual but indicated she was "leaning towards lesbian." She said, "I am slightly attracted to men but have no desire to be in a relationship with a man." She considers herself bisexual based on her sexual attraction to men. She identified her ethnic background as Hispanic. Her first awareness of same sex feelings came about in college but she never acted on it. She "defaulted" with heterosexuality but preferred to socialize with women more. The preference to socialize with women turned into looking at women in a more sexual way. She never talked to anyone about her feelings.

Participant #8 came out to herself gradually and did not have any difficulties realizing internally she was not straight. She indicated that knowing this lifestyle was marginally more acceptable in general society also made accepting herself easier. She

disclosed her bisexuality to her entire immediate family and to most of her non-work friends. Her mother was not accepting of her identity. She attributed this to her mother's traditional nature in terms of gender roles and sexuality. Participant #8 believed that some of her coworkers know and labeled her office as a "heteronormative culture."

Currently, she accepts that she is a 4-5 on the Kinsey scale[b] in relation to her sexuality. Participant #8 is also in her first deep relationship with a woman. Her mother still does not accept her lifestyle and the participant attributes her mother's disapproval to her beliefs and to the amount of time she was spending with her girlfriend. She also says she does not hide her sexuality but when asked about her plans she says, "I am going out to hang out with a friend and not my girlfriend."

Participant #9.--Participant #9 was a 25-year-old woman who identified as a lesbian. She identified her ethnic background as Latina. Her awareness of same sex feelings occurred around the age of 15. She became friends with an out Puerto Rican lesbian who was older and very confident in herself. Participant #9 realized she was attracted to her but was anxious about her feelings and did not verbalize it. Prior to age 15, she remembered a same sex crush at the preschool age but never recognized it as such.

This participant took awhile to come out to herself. She perceived herself as different from others. In relation to her Puerto Rican lesbian friend, she was content not labeling her feelings for this woman. This woman helped Participant #9 re-evaluate how

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[b] Alfred C. Kinsey established the Kinsey Institute to promote research in the field of human sexuality, gender, and reproduction. The Kinsey scale is a seven-point scale (0-6) developed to emphasize the continuity of gradations between exclusively heterosexual and exclusively homosexual.

she thought about being gay. She saw how confident her friend was and that made it easier for her to think at some point she would be okay with her lesbian sexuality. Her friends "sort of confronted" her and told

her "you know it is okay if you like ____." The conversations made Participant #9 more accepting of that fact that she might be gay.

At the age of 18, she was outed by her girlfriend's ex-girlfriend. Her mother was disapproving initially of her sexual orientation. Her mother told her she would rather have her daughter be pregnant or a whore instead of being gay. She attributed this to her family upbringing and ethnic background. After experiencing a major life crisis with her partner, Participant #9 said, "my mother saw how much I cared for my partner. It gave her a chance to see my partner as a person and not as a monster." Her friends were supportive once they understood who she was as a person. Her biggest supporter was her older brother, who is a social justice educator. He made her more socially aware as an individual, honest, and more comfortable with herself.

At present, Participant #9 is on a path towards integrating her queer identity and her Latina identity. She thinks that being a "Queer woman of color, specifically a Lesbian Latina" is the most central part of her identity. She does not have much of a connection with the LGBTQ community but wishes to change this aspect of her life. She has a few friends who identify as LGBTQ but does not feel supported by the community. She feels very connected to the Latino community but not supported as a whole. She attributed her feelings about the Latino community to her ability to "pass" as heterosexual and that she is not "visibly different." She thinks, "Given the stigma of homosexuality plus the

conservative traditional gender norms, being a Lesbian Latina would make people question me and my family. I think people would be a bit more hesitant about accepting me."

Participant #10.—Participant #10 was a 29-year-old woman who identified as a lesbian. She identified her ethnic background as mixed, which incorporated African American and Hispanic heritage. Her awareness of same sex feelings occurred during her senior year in high school. She had sensual dreams about women, not men. She felt scared and denied her feelings.

As she grew older, Participant #10 came out to herself in her third year in college. She faced barriers related to her co-workers, religion, and her family. The participant worked at a children's psychiatric ward and was scared that if her co-workers knew they would get her fired. She indicated her religious upbringing consisted of half Catholic and half Fundamental Evangelical Christian. She stated she grew up in a strict household where the family would watch televangelists with an anti-gay stance and anti-gay remarks were openly made within the family. She struggled with the internal guilt and shame. In addition to the internal struggle, she did not want to "lose face" with her peers and family or be called a sinner. Because of the religious and familial influence, she initially viewed her sexuality as negative.

Currently, Participant #10 has not come out to her family. She fears that she will cause her mother to have her final stroke. She will not tell her family until her mother passes. Her only relative that does know is her blood sister. The participant said, "[My sister] didn't support me. She admonished me, but didn't shut me out completely. We

talked occasionally." She did come out to her closest friends because she felt safe. She now works for a nonprofit organization where the environment is more supportive of her sexuality. Participant #10 feels she is involved somewhat as she belongs to several gay community groups and advocates for a few causes (gay rights, domestic violence, breast cancer). As far as the Black and Latino community, she claims both communities; however, she does not feel supported since "both cultures devalue homosexuality." She described herself as butch and people can usually guess she is homosexual. She only mentions her sexuality if it is pertinent because she refers to herself as a child of God. She now attends an affirming church where congregants do not care if she is gay.

Analysis of Data Within Research Question

Research Question 1: What is the progression of homosexual identity development (i.e. personal, familial and societal beliefs) for African American and/or Latino women?

The first research question inquired about the homosexual identity development of ethnic women in relation to the original models of homosexual identity development that were derived from studies of white lesbian women (Cass, 1979; Degges-White, Rice, & Myers, 2000; Troiden, 1988). Each stage identified cognitive and behavioral differences that most individuals should undergo as they progress through the development of their sexual identity. Every participant in the study disclosed their stories from their initial same sex attraction to where they were at the time they completed the questionnaires for the present study. Each participant in the study shared their individual journeys from the point that they came out to themselves to the time they faced the effect that their sexual orientation had on their personal, familial and societal beliefs.

The stages in homosexual identity development were used to examine the responses of the participants in the present study. Originally, Cass (1984) proposed the stages would occur in a certain order. Other models after Cass (1979) similarly followed the linear development path. The researcher for the present study hypothesized the stages would occur in a different order due to cultural differences. Each participant's response was reviewed to identify when the participants experienced cognitive and behavioral characteristics of the different identity stages as Cass described them (1979). Each stage was analyzed based on the participants' responses from the present study to determine if the stage was experienced and how that affected the development of each respondent's sexual identity.

Identity Confusion

"Individuals perceive that their behaviors (actions, feelings, thoughts) may be defined as homosexual" (Cass, 1984, p.147).

All the participants had a moment of confusion in regards to their actions, feelings and thoughts. Six of the participants became aware of same-sex feelings or thoughts at the age of 15 or younger. Two participants were aware in high school; one at the age of 16 and the other during her senior year of high school. Participant #8 preferred to socialize with women as a part of her awareness and another participant said she could not remember her first awareness but just always knew about this attraction. Six different participants referred to their feelings as "bad", "wrong", "different" and other negative synonyms. Participant #2 said,

> I first realized that I was attracted to women when I was 12 years old. I was with my friends at an outing and realized that all of them were looking at guys and talking about them and I was looking at girls. It made me feel weird and I began to realize I was "different".

She had a difficult time working through this process because she "did not want to be different, to stand out" and wanted to be "accepted" by her peers. Participant #7 had a similar experience. She said, "I would always catch myself checking out the same sex, instead of the opposite sex. I felt strange; I had no idea how to react to my feelings…"

Three of the six participants noted their concerns with their same-sex feelings and their religious upbringing at their first awareness. "CM" said she thought she was "doomed to death and hell". Participant #1 struggled with her feelings because she was brought up to believe homosexuality was a sin. She thought she would "suffer eternal damnation". Participant #10 also had an internal and external struggle with her religious beliefs and her feelings towards same sex individuals. She stated her internal religious struggle with God consisted of feelings of guilt, shame and grief. Her external struggle consisted of her network of friends, family, and the establishment of the church itself. She discussed her experiences and said,

> I went to a Baptist-funded institution my first year of college because it would keep me grounded in my faith. I remember being scared because I had some Disney items and the Baptists had done the boycott because of the "Gay Days at Disney." I thought they were going to be confiscated (Participant #10, personal communication, November 17, 2008).

Identity Comparison

With the consideration of being homosexual, "the individual is then faced with feelings of alienation as the difference becomes clearer" (Cass, 1984, p.151).

Eight participants indicated a concern with how their personal feelings for a same sex individual would affect their interactions with people in their network or support system. The people in their network or support system included friends, family and co-workers. The responses included specific ideas about people's reactions if and when they found out about the participant's sexual identity. Participant #1 felt inferior to her peers and family since she "had to hide" herself. Participant #2 convinced herself that being a lesbian would make her peers, family and co-workers uncomfortable and that she had let them down. Participant #3 said she "didn't want to deal with the negativity of others" because she knew "how judgmental people can be". Participant #7 was also afraid of people not accepting who she really was because of her sexuality. Participant #3, #9 and "CM" feared being ostracized by their co-workers. "CM" thought she would lose her job when she worked at a religious institution and knew she could not tell anyone. Participant #6 and #10 have not told their families yet. Participant #6 said, "I don't want to disappoint them yet" while #9 said, "I felt cut off even though I still have not told [my family]. It wouldn't be accepted."

Identity Tolerance

"With increasing commitment to a homosexual self-image, the individual seeks out the company of homosexuals to fulfill social, sexual, and emotional needs. Contact is

'necessary' rather than desirable. Disclosure to heterosexuals at this point is extremely limited" (Cass, 1984, p.151).

Cass's third stage, identity tolerance, incorporated reaching out to other homosexual individuals. The interactions with the homosexual individuals varied. Eight participants explicitly stated they had friends who were part of the LGBT community. Of the eight participants, only one participant had interactions with another lesbian individual prior to "coming out". Participant #3 had positive interactions with a "bi" foreign exchange student who hit on her. The contact opened her mind to the possibilities of relationships with women. She did not seek out this particular individual as a "necessity" because of her growing same sex feelings. Participant #3 did work in a gay bar as a go-go dancer prior to meeting her friend and partner. With the other seven participants, the women had only a couple of friends that were part of the LGBT community. Participant #2 said, "Some of my closest friends are a part of the LGBTQ community." Two other participants had partners during their high school years. Participant #5 talked about having "friends in the same boat as [she] was" and how they were "there for each other, especially because being 'gay/lesbian' wasn't the in or cool thing at the time."

Seven participants had more heterosexual friends within their support network than homosexual friends. Two participants had friends for social and emotional needs but the interaction never turned into a sexual relationship because the participants never came out to their friends; their friends were heterosexual. Participant #7 said, "Most of my friends were hetero, I had only a few friends that were gay, like 2 or 3, but the people I

mostly talk to are straight." Participant #3 was surrounded in a "straight world" before she came out. Four participants had homosexual friends who aided in their exploration of a lesbian identity. Participant #9 had the older Puerto Rican friend who was a lesbian and said, "She made me re-evaluate how I thought about being gay. Seeing how confident she was made it easier for me to at least think that at one point I will be okay with it." Participant #6 had heterosexual friends but did not really have a lot of lesbian friends until age 22. She talked about coming out to her heterosexual friends with the help of homosexual friends.

> I didn't officially "come out" to my straight friends until age 24. Before that I was only out to those that were homosexual like me. Because I didn't really have a lot of lesbian friends until age 22, I never felt the support and pride that one does when trying to "come out". I later found strength as I connected to other lesbians/gays and became proud of who I was instead of just being ashamed of what I wasn't. It was this lack of support from friends and family that made it very hard to not only "come out" to others, but to myself (Participant #6, personal communication, October 21, 2008).

Each participant had different disclosure ("coming out") experiences. Eight participants had a limited disclosure experience within their heterosexual network. The limited disclosure consisted of the participants revealing their true feelings to people who they felt comfortable telling first. Seven participants came out to their friends first. Participant #2 started telling her closest friends and then adapted the attitude "if you need to know ask". Participant #9 said, "When I was in high school, I told only my closest two friends." Of those seven, five of the participants later came out to their family. Participant #3 discussed how she felt more comfortable telling her family after she told her closest friends. She said,

> I eventually (after 2 months of secretly dating my partner) told my closest friends and all they had to say was, "DUH!" I felt a little more comfortable and then moved on to tell my dad and brother… My mom (Mexican and Hungarian) was very up front and didn't understand…I had a meeting with my sisters and not all of them were as supportive as I had anticipated…. (Participant #3, personal communication, September 17, 2008)

Two participants have not yet come out to their family even though they have come out to their closest friends. Participant #10 came out to her sorority sisters because she said, "I felt safe." With respect to her family, she said, "I felt cut off even though I haven't told them yet. It wouldn't be accepted." She felt her news would give her mother another stroke and she is determined not to disclose to her family until after her mother passes. Participant #6 came out to her homosexual network first before coming out to her heterosexual friends two years later. She has chosen not to come out to her family because she does not "want to disappoint them yet."

Work environment influenced disclosure for two participants. "CM", participant #4, limited her disclosure to individuals due to her work environment at a Catholic university in a Central American state. Participant #10 felt scared at the time she was coming out because she worked in a children's psychiatric ward and thought she would get fired. She related that her current workplace was more supportive.

Identity Acceptance

> *"A philosophy of fitting into society, while also retaining a homosexual lifestyle, is adopted and entails the continued maintenance of a passing strategy (pretending heterosexuality) at pertinent times" (Cass, 1984, p.151).*

Nine participants accepted a lesbian identity. One participant accepted a bisexual identity but was leaning towards a lesbian identity at the time of the present study. Three participants explained their experience accepting their identity was not difficult or there were no barriers with accepting their own lesbian identity. Participant #3 felt she was very lucky to have had experiences that initially made her comfortable with homosexuality. Participant #8 said "Nothing made it difficult to tell myself and realize internally." Seven participants explicitly stated their experience accepting their lesbian identity was difficult until recently, when they were able to come to terms with their identity. One participant started therapy to cope with coming out. Participants related their difficulty with their upbringing as well as a lack of support from their surrounding network. Participant #9 said,

> When I was younger, I would say that family upbringing, and ethnic background as well as the youth culture as a whole were huge barriers to coming to terms with my sexual orientation. The fact that being gay was seen as such a negative by my peers, my cultural community and not talked about at all by my mother made it really hard for me to be okay with that piece of me (personal communication, October 30, 2008).

Participants also realized that people may be judgmental and they did not want to deal with the negativity of others. Participant #2 said she "perceived herself as a role model and didn't want to let anyone down."

Identity Pride

"...characterized by feelings of pride towards one's homosexual identity and fierce loyalty to homosexuals as a group, who are seen as important and creditable while heterosexuals have become discredited and devalued" (Cass, 1984, p.152).

Based on participant responses, all participants were willing to become a part of the LGBTQ community, but they did not express strong opposing feelings towards heterosexuals. All of the participants had a network of people and friends who belonged to the LGBTQ community as well as the heterosexual community. CM said, "I have plenty of friends, and most of them are straight because I chose to get more involved in the community instead of just hanging out with the LGBT crowd." Participant #3 had different support networks because prior to coming out she was "completely submerged in a straight world," but also worked in a gay bar as a go-go dancer. She is friends with a lot of people and also knows that within each community there can be drama because "everyone knows everyone."

There were differences between the participants and their experiences in getting involved with the LGBTQ community. Participant #2 was in her first relationship and was told by her partner that she "was not gay enough". The negative interaction affected the participant's ability to belong to any group initially because she thought she would have to prove herself and not just be seen as "confused". It was not until she attended a LGBTQ leadership conference that she felt like she really belonged.

Five participants are currently involved in an LGBTQ community or group. Participant #1 works at a LGBTQ youth center, Participant #7 is active in the LGBTA (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Alliance) at her college while Participants #3, #5 and #10 are active in several LGBTQ community groups. Participant #5 is not involved with LGBTQ groups incorporating her culture but stays abreast of the issues and tries to make others, both heterosexual and homosexual, aware as well. Participant #9 said,

"Unfortunately, I do not have much of a connection to the LGBTQ community, which is something that I would like to change."

None of the participants discussed devaluing or discrediting heterosexuals. Only one participant discussed the thought of a negative interaction with heterosexuals. Participant #1 said, "I'm very open with nearly everyone expect in situations where I feel threatened (like at a straight club…I'm fearful if I tell a guy I'm not interested because I'm a lesbian I'll be assaulted)." The thought of being physically hurt was her biggest concern with heterosexual individuals. As stated before, participants for the present study had maintained their heterosexual networks for support during their homosexual identity development.

Identity Synthesis

> *"A homosexual identity is no longer seen as overwhelmingly the identity by which an individual can be characterized. Individuals come to see themselves as people having many sides to their character, of which only one part is homosexuality. A lifestyle is developed in which the homosexual identity is no longer hidden, so that disclosure becomes a non-issue"*
>
> *(Cass, 1984, p.152).*

Seven participants have incorporated and understood that their lesbian identity is a part of who they are and not something that defines them. Two participants who synthesized their identity as a part of who they are would only disclose their sexual orientation when asked or prompted by another individual. Participant #3 said,

> I don't know that I'd say, "Hi, I'm ____ and I'm gay." If a stranger were to ask me who I was I don't know that I'd even touch on my sexuality. When I identified as straight, I never brought that up in casual conversation, so I don't feel a need to now…however, I am comfortable with my sexuality and if "relationships" come up, I have no problem being open (Participant #3, personal communication, September 23, 2008).

Three participants were comfortable with their lesbian identity; however, they continued to have selected disclosure issues with certain individuals and situations. Participant #1 said she is "very open with everyone" except in situations where she would feel threatened. The participants who have not experienced a synthesized lesbian identity were Participants #6, #8, and #10. Participant #8 identified as a bisexual who considered lesbian relationships. Participant #6 and #10 struggled with being open with their lesbian identity to others and within their internal beliefs. Two participants, #5 and #9, explicitly affirmed their lesbian identity. Participant #5 said, "Anyone asks me what I am, I am a college educated lesbian Latina. It's a lot but it's me." Participant #9 stated, "I think that being a Queer woman of Color, specifically a Lesbian Latina, is the most central aspect of my person."

Research Question 2: What common themes dealing with issues of identity development emerge among female, lesbian and African American or Latino women?

Theme 1: "Life Support"

Within every participant's responses, there was at least one person who served as their support system during their identity development process. The support they received was encouraging and uplifting to each participant. The support was not necessarily from a

member of the LGBTQ community. Participant #1 had a supervisor at the time she came out to her family who taught her the importance of living openly and never being ashamed of whom she was, whomever that may be. The supportive individual(s) accepted the participant for who they were and allowed the individual to develop their internal feelings about being lesbian. Several participants referenced their support system "made it easier" and "helped cope/understand" themselves. It seemed to be a key element in navigating their way and coping with the internal and external emotions these participants dealt with on a daily basis.

Their interactions with their support network, whether friends or family, determined if the individual had a difficult or an easy time developing a lesbian identity. If there was a lack of support at one point during the participant's development, then they described their experience as difficult. Participant #6 did not come out to her straight friends until age 24 but had a lot of lesbian friends at age 22 who she was out to at the time. She felt ashamed of what she was not instead of proud of who she was.

> I never felt the support and pride that one does when trying to "come out"…It was this lack of support from friends and family that made it very hard to not only "come out" to others, but to myself.

Participant #7 talked about growing up in a western state in an urban area and referred to it as a "homophobic environment". She discussed the cultures being less understanding. She explained,

> I grew up in Inglewood and many people consider Inglewood ghetto, the population is mostly Hispanics and Blacks…In school, I would get such rude comments. I was one of the few people who had the guts to come out in school, because most people students were scared of other students reactions and so forth…Students would give me rude comments, such as "You're going to Hell" or

> if I would walk my girlfriend to class and we would hold hands, people would just turn around and say "that's nasty". My senior year the environment got better because people knew for awhile, so I guess they got used to the whole idea, but I knew who was ok with it and who wasn't (Participant #7, personal communication, October 21, 2008).

Interactions similar to the one above made the participants' experience developing their lesbian identity difficult. The individuals were able to handle the negativity once they were in their environment and around their support group for an extended period of time.

Theme 2: "It's all in the Family"

Most of the participants had family members who rejected their sexual identity. The rejection caused a dysfunctional relationship. Various reactions included one participant's parents sending her to counseling as well as a Christian school to "fix the problem," and another's parent slowly weaned himself out of his daughter's life because he did not agree with her partner being female. Two participants had wavering support from their mothers. They said their mothers "did not understand" or would not "get it" but the mothers still made an effort for their lesbian daughters. CM discussed the impact her lifestyle would make on her mother in her neighborhood. She said, "I don't want to have people staring at her because she's the one that has the lesbian kid. She does not deserve it."

Many of the participants mentioned being raised a certain way and the expectations of how they would live their lives in accordance with their upbringing. These expectations were a combination of culture and also religion. CM stated,

> One major barrier was that I was raised Catholic. I was very Catholic. I still miss it, but I can't be Catholic anymore because they have yet to deal with us gays and

> lesbians… I know that the doctrine states that gay is wrong… (Personal communication, September 30, 2008).

Another participant said her father "feels like women are a minority and need a man to get anywhere in a man's world." The customs of ethnic families and culture influenced the way the participants came out and ultimately accepted themselves as lesbians. The familial and cultural beliefs of ethnic groups influence the upbringing of an individual. If the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are against those familial and cultural influences, the individual has to make sense of their experiences and how to navigate their lesbian identity in conjunction to their immediate surroundings.

Theme 3: "Passing Thrice"

The taboo of homosexuality in the cultural community created a non-welcoming atmosphere that influenced some of the participants to stay "hidden" during their development. The participants pointed out their experience with the different generations within the cultural community. Participant #3 said, "It is culturally unacceptable and, in most cases, the thought of homosexuality seems to be outside the mental grasp of older Latinos." Participant #7 also discussed the older generation. She said, "In my experience, Hispanic and Black people are less understanding, especially the older ones." Participant #9 discussed her mother's view.

> I can clearly remember my mother telling me that she would have rather I be pregnant or a whore instead of being gay (this was when she first found out). That hit me really hard because being promiscuous in the Latino culture is a huge taboo for women and at the time I was a very good student at a really good university and a very respectful person (Participant #9, personal communication, October 30, 2008).

In the present study, a lack of visibility of out individuals affected participants because they did not have "someone to look up to" within their culture who was like them. CM felt that she was "not like her peers and had no one to ask" about being lesbian or for help in coping. Other participants had experiences with LGBTQ members who did not fully accept them. From the responses, the lack of lesbian role models did not seem to be due to a cultural issue but the behavioral aspect of the individual. One participant was told she did not "act gay enough". Another participant who was African American said she felt detached from the lesbian community in her city.

Most participants had to manage and navigate their lesbian identity between their cultural community and the LGBTQ community in order to understand how to integrate both aspects to their new found identity. Based on participants' responses in the present study, they had to pass or come out two times; one with their cultural community and another in the LGBT community. Every participant mentioned the cultural upbringing as having an impact on their experience developing a lesbian identity. Both African American self-identified participants stated they felt less accepted by the Black community. One of the two participants also did not feel accepted by the LGBTQ community. Participant #2 said

> I was told in my first relationship with a woman that I did not seem gay enough and that stuck. It made me very self conscious because I was able (and had been for a very long time) to pass as straight. I felt that I had to prove myself and if I did not then I would be seen as someone who was confused or a straight girl trying to be gay and fit in, which was not true (Participant #2, personal communication, September 11, 2008).

Among the rest of the participants, five participants had interesting experiences and thoughts about the balance between the two communities. Three of these participants felt accepted by the LGBTQ community. Participant #7 discussed relating more with the LGBT members. She was part of a LGBTQ focused student organization where she was able to connect with other LGBTQ persons of color who experienced what she was going through developing her identity. In relation to her cultural community, Participant #7 felt she was not going to be accepted by everyone and also changed her perceptions of her cultural community. Participant #9 and #10 felt similarly to those sentiments. Participant #9 also interjected that regardless of those thoughts, she did not lessen her involvement with the Latino community. Participant #10 wanted to be more engaged with the cultural community even though she stated, "coming out made me less accepted".

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS

The research conducted with the present study sought to bring additional information to homosexual identity development specifically focused on lesbian females who are African American and Latina (a triple minority). The research included a selected group of ten women who voiced their experiences and described their journey toward developing an ethnic lesbian identity.

Cass was the first to develop a model of homosexual identity development. Models which followed (Troiden ,1989, Fassinger & Miller, 1996, Degges-White, Rice, & Meyers, 2000) used the knowledge and foundation that Cass laid forth. Within their research, these authors noted future research lacked evaluating the identity development

of cultural minority individuals progressing towards a homosexual identity. The present study obtained the responses of ten ethnic women belonging to the Black or Hispanic/Latina culture and asked different questions to understand how they developed their lesbian identity.

Based on the present responses, there was a difference how each stage was experienced compared to Cass' identity stages. Some aspects of the stages Cass described were not experienced at all or there was a variation to the experience. In this study, Cass's (1984) stage 1, "identity confusion" (p.147), all ten participants shared the initial cognition of confusion Cass proposed (1979, 1984) for homosexual identity development. The reactions varied among the participants but the stage itself was present. The responses showed that six out of 10 participants viewed their initial confusion as negative. Although there were varying experiences, each individual continued on a developmental path towards continued exploration of homosexuality.

Stage 2, "identity comparison" (p. 151), was experienced by eight participants as they had concerns with how other people would view them. The participants' concerns with the judgment by their peers were similar to alienation, although it was not explicitly stated. Their concerns for other judgments occurred early during the participants' recognition of their same sex feelings. Cass (1984) found "there was a lack of definitive boundaries between Stage 1 and Stage 2". Cass (1984) also found that behaviors (actions, thoughts, feelings) were present in individuals but there was a blending of adjacent stages 1 and 2. Degges-White, Rice, & Myer (2000) had participants use wording such as "different"; however, the authors noted these voiced feelings were closer

to identity comparison. In the current study, the participants used words such as "weird" when they first acknowledged feelings unlike their heterosexual peers. The descriptions from the ethnic lesbian participants showed an intermingling of stage 1 and stage 2 during their identity development. Six participants used language such as "different" and "bad" to describe their initial thoughts and feelings about their lesbian identity development.

There was a variation in the present study of what Cass described as the experience typical of an individual progressing through the third stage. Based on the responses, participants did not feel it was "necessary" to contact or seek out other homosexuals prior to self-acceptance of their lesbianism, as Cass indicated in her initial third stage of identity tolerance. All of the participants reached out to an LGBTQ individual or community; however, it was after they had already accepted their lesbian identity. This variation may have been due to the lack of a gay community growing up. Participant #3 stated, "There was only one gay guy that was out. I didn't have a peer group but I thought about the possibility of dating a woman, if I found someone I was interested in." Another participant discussed the lack of visible homosexuals in their culture as she said, "there weren't many out black lesbians for me to look up to." The participants were able to navigate their lesbian identity with the support of other individuals. The other individuals were not necessarily part of the LGBTQ community. Several of the women in the study used terms like "easier" and talked about people in their lives encouraging them to "never be ashamed of who you are" and the "importance of living openly". The participants learned how to accept their feelings and accept that

they cannot do anything about other people judging them. Individuals who supported the participants were both heterosexual and homosexual. Seven of the participants had more support from their heterosexual network than their homosexual network. Again, the participants' did not necessarily seek out homosexual individuals as Cass (1979) indicated prior to their self-acceptance. Not seeking out homosexual individuals may be attributed to the lack of visibility of ethnic lesbians as well as lack of support from their heterosexual network.

For stage 4 "identity acceptance" (Cass, 1979, p.151), nine of the ten participants accepted their lesbian identity. The discrepancy of stage progression occurred at the time when the participants accepted their lesbian identity. There also seemed to be a differentiation of accepting a lesbian identity internally and externally for the participants. The participants tended to accept their identity internally before disclosing it externally to their network. According to Cass (1979), participants should accept their identity after seeking interactions with homosexual individuals. Only Participant #3 accepted a lesbian identity after interaction with homosexual individuals. An interaction early on gave her the possibility of a lesbian identity. With further interaction, she accepted a lesbian identity. Other participants accepted their lesbian identity without any interactions with homosexuals. Accepting their identity, whether easy or difficult, was dependent upon their interactions with their surrounding network of primarily heterosexual family, friends, and environment.

Cass (1984) discussed a passing strategy or "pretending heterosexuality" as a part of the acceptance stage. For the present study, the participants did not discuss pretending

to be heterosexual but more so, they did not openly discuss their homosexual identity in different situations. Participant #1 said, "I am open with nearly everyone except in situations where I feel threatened." Four participants discussed just keeping their sexuality private in their work environment. Participant #6 stated,

> I try to keep my sexuality private at work. Although my work has very clear rules regarding sexual discrimination, there are jokes that co-workers make here and there for the sake of humor that I would rather not be included in (personal communication, October 21, 2008).

Two other participants thought that their co-workers knowledge of their homosexuality would get them fired. Although their statements indicated that they were passing at pertinent times, it does not mean that they acted heterosexual; they just did not disclose their sexual identity.

There was a continuous trend of language differentiation noted while examining the differences of identity development models. Four participants stated they were "lipstick lesbians" or "femme", meaning they did not fit the stereotype of a lesbian by society's view, and were able to "pass" even though they would be open with individuals about their lesbian identity when prompted. Participant #3 discussed when her coworkers found out they made comments like "She's a lesbian? But she's so sweet and so pretty." She also said she would not mention her sexuality unless relationships or similar conversations were discussed. Participant #5 talked about making people aware that lesbians do not consist of women with mullets or chopped hair, tattoos, an "alternative job nor running the streets like a crazed woman". She was very passionate about showing

people that they should look "beyond stereotypes and that just because someone looks one way does not mean that [equates to] their sexual identity". Participant #7 said

> Many people tell me that I am too pretty to be gay, I do not dress gay, or look gay or maybe I just have not met the right guy or other excuses! I have also been asked pretty personal questions, such as, "Well have you ever had sex with a guy?" or "The guy probably did not do it right". I just tell them that my sexuality has nothing to do with me having sex with guys. (Personal communication, October 26, 2008).

Participant #9 stated, "Most people would never guess I am a lesbian so I have to disclose any information for anyone to know". She directly linked her ability to "pass" to acceptance in the Latino community. She said, "The Latino community readily accepts me without any hesitation because I am not visibly 'different'. I think that I may be different if I were visibly queer". Two participants mentioned feeling uncomfortable about coworkers' anti-gay jokes. One participant avoided these interactions, which does not necessarily make her "act heterosexual"; however, the other participant tried to avoid the anti-gay jokes but would nod and smile if caught in the given situation.

The identity pride stage, stage 5, seemed to be inconsistent with Cass's original model due to the varying degree of interactions with the homosexual and heterosexual communities among the present respondents. For this study, the cultural community and the LGBTQ community were discussed with the participants. There was a balance among the participants with their involvement and activity within each community. Some individuals did not change their involvement either way after accepting their lesbian identity. One participant did state she wanted to improve her involvement with the LGBTQ community.

The "identity pride" stage 5 (Cass, 1984) described individuals in terms of viewing the heterosexual community as devalued and discredited. This devaluing was not experienced as reflected in the responses of current participants. The participants talked about keeping their heterosexual network and how it was important to some in navigating their development of a lesbian identity. One participant discussed that in different situations (a hetero club) she may feel threatened due to her homosexual identity. In the present study, the idea for this stage was congruent to Degges-White, Rice, & Myer's (2000) study where they said "perhaps this stage was relevant 20 years ago" (p. 329). The characteristics of the "identity pride" stage (Cass, 1984) were not universal among the participants and can be altered to incorporate involvement in their new community for the development of a lesbian identity for African American and Latino women.

Not every woman in the present study has synthesized their lesbian identity as a part of their whole self. It was very interesting to note the variation in age and experiences that the women disclosed during the study. The participants who were closer to the 30 year range were not as integrated with their identity as were the participants who were in their mid to lower twenties. The 37 year old, as an exception to the age criteria for the study, integrated her identity within her social settings; however, when she was visiting in her Central American homeland, she continued a passing strategy to "save face" for her mother in the community.

Proposed Model for Ethnic Lesbian Identity Development

Although the results of the present study cannot be extended beyond the ten participants to other African-American or Latino lesbians, it is beneficial to consider the

implications for a proposed new model for the ethnic lesbian community and identity development. Based on the data, responses, and themes throughout this study, formulating different stages to address the concerns of the community is pertinent for this study. Each stage was considered within the context of the present study and its participants.

Proposed Stages for Ethnic Lesbian Identity Development

Stage 1: Confusion/Comparison

Stage2: Internal Acceptance

Stage 3: Limited Disclosure

Stage 4: External Acceptance/Involvement

Stage 5: Synthesis

Due to the blending of stage 1 and stage 2 characteristics from this study and previous researchers' findings (Cass, 1984; Degges-White, Myers, & Rice, 2000), the proposed stage 1 for Ethnic Lesbians combines the former confusion and comparison stages, as the individual is assessing their thoughts and feelings in relation to their environment, networks, and beliefs. Next, these individuals accepted their identity as a lesbian. Degges-White, et al., (2000) noted the identity acceptance stage would be a better representation of their subjects if it had consisted of two stages. The two stages were first being a "more reflective inner process" and second a "more external process" (p. 328). Based on the data in this study, identity acceptance was found to happen first internally and then externally. The acceptance was done internally as the women were aware of how their sexual identity of lesbianism would affect their personal lives and

interactions with others. The stigma of homosexuality in their cultural community affected the participants' ability to become visibly "out". Greene (1994) stated "homophobia in these communities makes gay and lesbian members more vulnerable and perhaps more inclined to remain closeted and, hence, invisible within their ethnic communities" (p. 248). Once the individual accepted themselves as a lesbian and "tried on" the identity, they felt more comfortable to disclose to others; however, it was to their most trusted peers first. After becoming more at ease with their decision to come out to others and receiving their reactions, whether positive or negative, they decided to come out to their family members. Their disclosure was dependent upon the individual's familial beliefs and relationships. It was important in this study to just have the "limited disclosure" stage address the disclosure piece.

Cass (1984) discussed individuals passing or "acting heterosexual". The ten participants did not mention acting heterosexual in their responses, but rather limited their disclosure to individuals who they felt would respect their identity and even passed at pertinent times for their safety and well being. When individuals felt more comfortable as a lesbian and interacted more with the LGBTQ community, the participants for this study became more involved or wanted to become more involved with their new community. They also started to be more open with others in their network, if they had reached this stage, and were comfortable telling more individuals outside of their network of close peers and family, if they had disclosed to the family members in the limited disclosure stage. The final stage involved integrating their lesbian identity and understanding it was only a portion of their whole identity. Based on the responses, the

individuals who synthesized their identity were able to better handle other individuals making comments about their sexual identity and understand global implications for their future. Participant #3, who was very comfortable with her sexual orientation, talked about her responses to individuals after they found out she was a lesbian. Men and people in an older generation were mentioned. With men, she said

> Men are the most annoying about the situation. We constantly get comments like, "That is cool you two are gay but you are still missing one thing." It gets awkward when we have to explain that "IF we MISSED it, we could buy it" (Participant #3, personal communication, September 23, 2008).

In discussion with the older generation, who were not accepting of Participant #3 and her partner because it was "against God and unnatural", the participant would remind the judgmental individuals "the Bible says to love thy neighbor and only HE can judge". She also talked about how she realized that she and her partner will "never be able to protect each other with a family insurance plan, adopt a child (in her state), or benefit from the laws of marriage". Participant #9 has been very vocal about who she is as an individual who is Latina and a lesbian. She thought it had an impact on her mother accepting who she was and becoming proud of her daughter. The participant said she "became a more socially aware individual but also more honest and comfortable with myself".

Future Implications on Sexual Identity Development

Although there is great insight evaluating and utilizing early models of identity development, it is important to understand change occurs over time and future models have just as much and maybe even more implications for identity development. In reflection, there are several different factors that influence an individual throughout their

life. Stage models may be appropriate to evaluate individuals as a starting point for basic understanding. Incorporating multiple factors and understanding outside influences aid in the overall evaluation of experiences. A proposed non-linear model for lesbian identity development for women in general as well as the ethnic population should be considered in future research. Elements of a non-linear sexual identity development model should incorporate societal, familial, cultural and personal beliefs, including but not limited to religion. As reported in this study, there are a variety of influential factors that women make meaning of that change over time throughout their development of a sexual identity.

There needs to be consideration for the diversity of experiences across race, gender, and ethnicity as well as the social influences in an individual's life. Horowitz and Newcomb (2001) discussed social constructionist perspectives and their relation to sexual identity.

> The social constructionist perspective holds that the process of identity formation is a continual, two-way interactive process between the individual and the social environment, and that the meanings the individual gives to these factors influence the development of self-constructs and identity. Sexual identity develops within this contextual framework and, because it is influenced by continual interaction, is fluid over time and experience, throughout one's life (p. 1-2).

The continual interaction of an individual's life influences and interactions would impact their sexual identity development. These differences are generally overlooked in stage models (Horowitz & Newcomb, 2001) and participants' experiences in the present study were more complex and varied in order and timing of development (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996). It is the meaning an individual takes from their experiences or a

particular factor in their life that frames their identity. The meaning is not static since the interactive process is on-going (Horowitz & Newcomb, 2001).

It is important to note the individual differences as it would help professionals and people in general understand individuals developing a sexual identity. An overall understanding is important because the women in the study all referred to a support network that aided in their acceptance of their lesbian self. The participants in the study balanced the stereotypes and discrimination from two different communities, cultural and LGBT, because ethnic-minority homosexuals exist as minorities within minorities (Greene, 1994). Individuals within their communities possessing the knowledge could better support someone, albeit their friend, sister, mother, cousin, developing a lesbian identity. A broad perspective on sexual identity development can minimize risk of stereotyping to help develop healthy and positive sexual identity for different individuals (Horowitz & Newcomb, 2001).

A growing area for concern for professionals is the mental health of homosexual individuals as they progress in the development of a healthy identity. It is pertinent for practitioners and researchers to acknowledge the unique combinations of influences and psychological demands for members of the triple minority population (Greene, 1994). Individuals are making sense of their thoughts and feelings in connection to what they have been brought up to believe to be true by their family, churches, communities, and society at large, which the majority of the time is the opposite of what the homosexual individuals are currently experiencing. It is important to recognize the backgrounds and histories of individuals who belong to an ethnic or racial community, if they divulge they

are questioning their sexuality. Yarhouse, Tan & Pawlowski (2005) suggested recognizing there are multiple trajectories for LGB identity development and, therefore, identity is a continual process and ever-changing.

Recommendations for Practitioners and Researchers

Sexual identity development is fluid as individuals experience life, interact with people, form relationships and evoke meaning out of every situation. Sexual identity is only a part of overall individual identity and greater understanding of difference is just as important as what may be similar. Recommendations for practitioners and researchers in the area of ethnic lesbian identity development need to include a heightened awareness for and insight into the lives of these women on a daily basis in professional practice, and in examining their lives through the lens of multiple identities. The present study evolved as an expansion of previous research, and future research should be directed towards a better understanding of the following issues.

1. Research should focus on expanding to additional ethnic populations of women, and the differences among the groups in terms of their lesbian identity development examined, since this study included African American and Latino women only.
2. A comparison of identity development between ethnic men who are gay and ethnic women who are lesbian should be performed. Do their respective cultures / ethnicities view one gender or the other differently? Better? Worse?
3. A qualitative study about the perceptions of ethnic homosexual people by heterosexual ethnic individuals who know someone who is gay/lesbian or

have a family member that is a member of the LGBTQ community should be carried out.

4. Practitioners should continue to enforce non-discriminatory policies in hiring and support developmental programs for LGBT individuals and students.
5. Greater sensitivity to language (pronouns, references to heteronormative practices) should be promoted in daily practices and publications.

The present study was able to bring to light the experiences of ethnic women developing a lesbian identity. There were similarities and discrepancies within the stage progressions in comparison to the original homosexual and lesbian identity development models. Due to the similarities and differentiations between the early stage models based on majority populations and this study, there needs to be a continuation of research to expand knowledge and understanding across a range of ethnicities. With knowledge of lesbian identity development across different populations, such as African American and Latino women, and their lived experiences, we as practitioners and researchers can better advocate for these individuals. The topic of sexual orientation and identity has become a political force that affects everyone in all aspects of daily life and could meaningfully impact social change (Bernstein, 2002).

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Appendix A

Call for Participants

My name is Alexandria Quiñones and I am a graduate student in the Department of Counseling and Student Development at Eastern Illinois University. Dr. Charles G. Eberly is my faculty supervisor and chair of my research committee. I am conducting research on the topic of ethnic lesbian identity, focusing on African American and Latino women and I am interested in interviewing women between the ages of 18 and 30 years who identify as lesbian (whether to only you or others) and belong to these populations.

The purpose of the study was to identify the progression of homosexual identity development pertaining to lesbians and if it varies for racial or ethnic women. The idea for this study was sparked by my experience with a family member is Latina lesbian but is not currently out to the family because of cultural and familial biases. I am interested in hearing about other stories and being able to be a voice for other lesbian women.

For the study, an outline of the expectations between researcher and participant will be sent to you. Once you have consented to participating, a series of questions will be provided via email to understand your experience developing a sexual identity as an ethnic woman. As the participant, you can choose a pseudo-name when you respond to the questions, if you feel more comfortable in doing so. The completed questions should be returned via email to the interviewer within three days of receiving the survey. Once the interviewer has reviewed the answers, follow up emails may occur to clarify any information and to member check emerging issues.

Please know that all the information provided to me will be held in the strictest of confidence. If at any point you feel uncomfortable, you don't have to answer any question you do not wish to answer. If you need additional help, please alert me and resources can be discussed to alleviate any discomfort. You have the right to withdraw consent at any time without consequence, and all data will be destroyed.

If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to contact me via email at aquinones@eiu.edu or call me at 410-300-7114. Thank you in advance and I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,
Alexandria Quiñones

Appendix B

Rubric

Ethnic Lesbian Identity Development: Reasons for carrying out this study

The purpose of the study was to identify the progression of homosexual identity development pertaining to lesbians and if it varies for racial or ethnic women. It is considering the idea of a triple minority and its effects on sexual identity development. The major idea behind this study was based upon the fact there was little to no research which addressed the development of a homosexual identity as a racial or ethnic woman.

In order to achieve a breadth of scope for the research, surveys distributed through email were utilized.

1. If you are willing to be part of this study, please reply to this email straightaway, confirming the appropriate confidential email address for this research.
2. As I cannot come easily to interview you and talk about the problem outlined above, I am trying to gather the data by email interview.
3. Discussion with you will be in the strictest confidence and participants' names will not be revealed in any documents or papers developed from this research, or to any other participants in this research. If you wish to use a pseudo-name, please indicate so to the researcher.
4. You will be asked seven substantive questions along with a few biographical ones at the beginning. There will be two different sets of questions, the first set includes a basic understanding of your identity development and the second set contains more in depth questions about your identity in relation to your ethnic or racial background. This is to obtain a better understanding of your personal journey.
5. The questions will be sent to you as an attached word document for you to answer and explore your experiences developing your lesbian identity. Your answers may be followed up by supplementary questions via email. This process simulates a face-to-face interview. A summary document describing emerging themes will be sent to you at a later date for purposes of member-checking. I will need to know from your perspective if I 'got it'.
6. Please answer the survey questions in the word document, save the information, and resend as an attachment. This procedure is to allow you to write freely with ample space for your answers. The supplemental questions can be answered in email format.
7. Please do not delete the emails as it is your (and my!) record of our conversation.
8. Please reply to each communication within three days.

9. Our whole email discussion is expected to be completed within three weeks.

10. Many thanks for your help and time with this project.

Source: Busher (2001) as cited in James, N. & Busher, H. (2006). Credibility, authenticity, and voice: Dilemmas in online interviewing. *Qualitative Research, 6*(3), 403-420.

Appendix C

Informal Email (Follow-Up)

My name is Alexandria Quinones and I am a graduate student in the Department of Counseling and Student Development at Eastern Illinois University. Currently, I am doing research on the development of a sexual identity within African American and Latino women. I have contacted you previously and would really like to hear from you in regards to your participation for my study.

I am really looking forward to hearing your stories and understanding your experiences. My initial interest was because of my family member who is a closeted Latina lesbian to her family. After reading articles during my graduate classes that related to gay and lesbian individuals, I am curious as to what their experiences are and if it's shared by women like my family member. I would like to hear how women of a racial or ethnic background come to decide how personal, familial, and societal beliefs affect their identity development, if at all.

Please know that all the information provided to me will be held in the strictest of confidence You may choose a pseudo-name if you feel more comfortable in doing so. I understand this may be a sensitive topic to discuss so please do not hesitate to contact me if you are unsure about answering any questions or want to withdraw from the study. Participating is completely voluntary. If you need additional help because of any discomfort, please alert me and resources can be discussed to alleviate any discomfort. I will send you the surveys once you have agreed to participate in the survey and follow up to see how you are doing and make sure I 'get' your perspective.

If you have any further questions, please contact me via email at aquinones@eiu.edu or call me at 410-300-7114. Thank you in advance and I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,
Alexandria Quiñones

Appendix D1

Survey Questions – Round 1

1. What is your age?

2. How do you identify your racial or ethnic background?

3. How would you identify your sexual orientation?

4. When were you first aware of your same-sex feelings, or the sense that your sexual identity might be different from heterosexuals? What happened to cause that awareness and how did you feel?

5. What was your experience of "coming out" to yourself? What made it difficult? What helped make it easier? How did you perceive yourself in relation to peers? Family? Co-workers? Society at large?

6. What would you say were/are the major barriers to you accepting or not accepting yourself as a lesbian?

Appendix D2

Survey Questions – Round 2

1. What has been your experience of "coming out" to others? Who has been supportive? Who was the most difficult?

2. How would you describe your relationship to the lesbian community? To the Black or Latino community? For example, how supported do you feel by these two communities as a whole?

3. Did your "coming out" experience and identity as a lesbian woman change your sense of acceptance in the Black or Latino community? Your level of involvement in the Black or Latino community?

4. Is there any aspect of your identity that you consider central at present? If someone was to ask you who you are, and you were comfortable enough to be open with them, what would you say?

Appendix E

Thank You Email

Dear Participant,

Thank you so much for participating in my research study on Ethnic Lesbian Identity Development. Your stories and experiences will be a part of the needed literature in the area of African American and Latino women who form a lesbian identity. I am currently finishing the results and conclusions for the study. Once that is completed, I will send you a draft of the results in order for you to check the interpretation to make sure I got it right. Any feedback you have would be appreciated because I can include your thoughts for the final analysis.

It has been a pleasure working with you and I wish you well in your future endeavors. I can't thank you enough for aiding me in my graduate career and my future dream of developing a theory about ethnic lesbians and their journey of identity development. Please let me know if you would like to see the final draft of this research and I will email you the document. Thank you again!

Take care,
Ali Quinones